

Work Zone Changes Ahead

A Conversation with
MoDOT Chief Engineer Kevin Keith

By Kathy White



Motorists in Missouri might see some changes this summer. Or, if MoDOT's Chief Engineer Kevin Keith has his way, they might not notice anything at all.

Work zones, those intimidating set-ups of orange barrels, caution signs, orange-vested workers and mysterious equipment, will change under a new department initiative. Starting this construction season, MoDOT will enhance safety and efficiency in the zones, and reduce inconvenience to the traveling public.

Keith recently sat down with *Pathways* to talk about these changes and why work zones rank among MoDOT's top priorities.

Why are you focusing on work zones as one of your first initiatives as MoDOT's chief engineer?

The work-zone initiative is not new. But my assessment was that we hadn't made much progress. We're emphasizing work-zone changes because, due to projects accelerated by bond financing, we're doing a lot more work, and calls and complaints about work-zone delays have been going up. Also, our system continues to get more

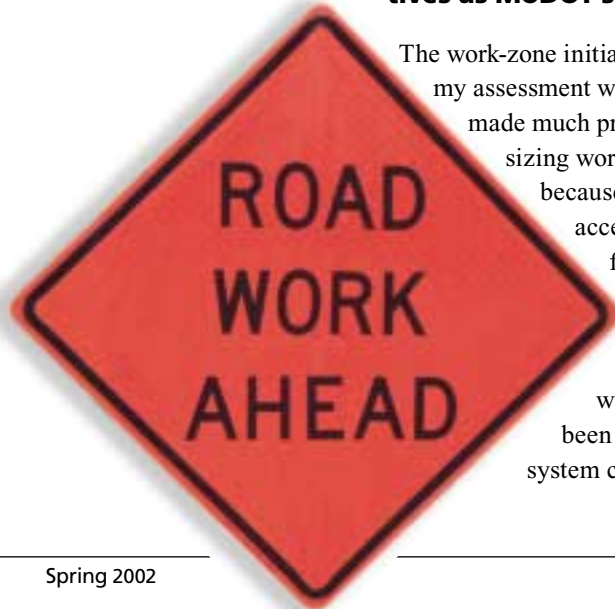
congested, so the places where we can work and not cause traffic problems are getting fewer and fewer.

What is it about work zones that concerns you?

Historically, we have designed work zones for our convenience, that is, the transportation industry, instead of for our customers' convenience.

Also, I think we've gotten complacent about how we manage work zones once they're in place. It's become pretty routine to see a reduced speed-limit sign at a work zone on a major route and see little or no activity going on.

Those things cause safety concerns because they're like crying wolf. Customers won't slow down if they don't believe there's work actually going on, and we need them to slow down, when we're there working. If we're not working there, we reinforce customers ignoring the signs and also create a perception problem: "What's the matter with these guys? Why aren't they working on this job?"





"I'm making this a priority by pushing it and ensuring it gets done." Kevin Keith

What about work-zone worker safety?

The fact is, more travelers than work-zone workers are killed or injured in work-zone accidents. But we want to look at a number of things, like working at night, contract incentives and disincentives, shorter work days – anything that might reduce the time a work zone is in use. That alone should make work zones safer for our employees, contractor employees and customers.

What can the driving public expect to see that's different about our work zones?

I hope the traveling public won't notice most of these changes! A work zone only impacts you if you're stuck in a five-mile backup in traffic. We want to come out at night after you go to bed, work on that road and clean it up, so the next day, when you go out again, all you see are some barrels in the median and the impact is just not there.

Of course, I'd like to think the public would notice our efforts and be very supportive, but that's probably not the case. Fewer complaints would be a good thing.

Do you expect a smooth transition?

It involves a lot of people, including MoDOT people, contractors, utility workers and others. It'll be a change in culture and it will take us a couple of years.

I have to say I have sympathy for the folks who actually will do the work. I suspect no

one really wants to work overnight to avoid inconveniencing a stranger. But that's what we're going to ask both MoDOT employees and contractors' employees to do.

Is there any cost associated with changing the way we do business?

We think this will have some incremental costs associated with it. I guess it's important enough that we're willing to pay a little more money to have our work zones operate more efficiently and be safer.

What's our payback for changing how we run our work zones?

One payback is safety. We can expect to have fewer work-zone accidents and injuries.

Second is congestion relief. At times our activities are the major cause of congestion. By minimizing that, we can reduce our long-term need to expand the system, which we simply can't afford.

Third is appreciation from our customers. That will come if we can make folks understand that we're doing everything we can to minimize disruptions to their lives.

How are you changing things to make this work?

We're modifying our contract language to require a two-day notice of lane closures. That gives us time to ask if we can anticipate any problems or special events coming up.

Also, we're looking across some of our functional areas like construction, maintenance, traffic and others to do as much as we can.

For example, if we put in a detour and close a stretch of road, are there things in that area our maintenance people need to do? If we close a lane for maintenance, what else needs to be done there? Does the grass need mowing? Do the cracks need to be sealed? Does a curb need painting?

In the past, we would never have done that. But let's lump more activities together to get more mileage out of that lane closure.

How will you know if this is successful?

We identified some performance measures to track our progress. For example, we can expect the average number of days it takes to get the work done to go down. We can expect the number of maintenance operations we do in off-peak hours to go up. And we can measure complaints and accidents.

What else would you like to say about work zone changes?

We've done some of these things in St. Louis and Kansas City for years, but this is our first statewide attempt to look at how we approach work zones.

The new initiative is going to take a lot of work and a lot of understanding by MoDOT and contractor employees. We're doing this to be safer and to squeeze every car and truck we can through the existing transportation system. ■

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